Western Attitudes toward DEATH: From the Middle Ages to the Present

by PHILIPPE ARIÈS

translated by PATRICIA M. RANUM

THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS
Baltimore and London
Thus far we have illustrated two attitudes toward death. The first, the oldest, the longest held, and the most common one, is the familiar resignation to the collective destiny of the species and can be summarized by the phrase, *Et moriemur*, and we shall all die. The second, which appeared in the twelfth century, reveals the importance given throughout the entire modern period to the self, to one's own existence, and can be expressed by another phrase, *la mort de soi*, one's own death.

Beginning with the eighteenth century, man in western societies tended to give death a new mean-
ing. He exalted it, dramatized it, and thought of it as disquieting and greedy. But he already was less concerned with his own death than with la mort de toi, the death of the other person, whose loss and memory inspired in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the new cult of tombs and cemeteries and the romantic, rhetorical treatment of death.

* * *

A major phenomenon occurred between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, a phenomenon which we must touch upon here, even if we do not analyze it in detail. This phenomenon did not occur in the world of real, acted-out events which the historian can easily collect and measure. It occurred in the obscure and extravagant world of phantasms, and the historian studying it ought to transform himself into a psychoanalyst.

At the end of the fifteenth century, we see the themes concerning death begin to take on an erotic meaning. In the oldest dances of death, Death scarcely touched the living to warn him and designate him. In the new iconography of the sixteenth century, Death raped the living. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, countless scenes or motifs in art and in literature associate death with love, Thanatos with Eros. These are erotic-macabre themes, or simply morbid ones, which reveal extreme complaisance before the spectacles of death, suffering, and torture. Athletic, nude executioners strip the skin from St. Bartholomew. When Bernini portrayed the mystic union of St. Theresa of Avila with God, he juxtaposed the images of the death agony and the orgasmic trance. The baroque theater staged its love scenes in tombs, such as that of the Capulets. The macabre literature of the eighteenth century united the young monk to the dead beauty over whom he was keeping watch.

Like the sexual act, death was henceforth increasingly thought of as a transgression which tears man from his daily life, from rational society, from his monotonous work, in order to make him undergo a paroxism, plunging him into an irrational, violent, and beautiful world. Like the sexual act death for the Marquis de Sade is a break, a rupture. This idea of rupture is something com letely

1 For example, the paintings by Hans Baldung Grien (d. 1545), "Rider with Death and a Maiden," in the Louvre, and "Death and the Woman," in the museum of Basel.


Until this point the stress had been on the familiarity with death and with the dead. This familiarity had not been affected, even for the rich and the mighty, by the upsurge of individualism beginning in the twelfth century. Death had become a more important event; more thought had to be given to it. Yet it had become neither frightening nor obsessive. It had remained familiar and tamed.

But from now on it would be thought of as a break.

This notion of a break was born and developed in the world of erotic phantasms. It then passed into the world of real and acted-out events.

Of course, at that point it lost its erotic characteristics, or at least they were sublimated and reduced to Beauty. Death no longer desirable, as in the macabre novels, but it was admirable in its beauty. This is what would be called the romantic death, found in Lamartine in France, the Bronte family in England, and Mark Twain in America.

We have many literary examples of this. Lamartine's "Méditations poétiques" are meditations on death. We also have a great number of memoirs and letters. During the 1840s a French family, the de La Ferronays, was decimated by tuberculosis. One survivor, Pauline Craven, published the intimate diaries and correspondence of her brothers, sisters, and parents, most of which were narratives of illnesses, death agonies, deaths, and thoughts about death.\(^5\)

Of course, in many ways these memoirs recall the old customs. The ceremony of death in bed, presided over by the dying person surrounded by a crowd of relatives and friends, persists and still provides the framework for the setting. But it is at once obvious that something has changed.

In the past death in bed was a solemn event, but also an event as banal as seasonal holidays. People expected it, and when it occurred they followed the rituals laid down by custom. But in the nineteenth century, a new passion stirred those present. Emotion shook them, they cried, prayed, gesticulated. They did not refuse to go through the activities dictated by custom; on the contrary. But while performing them they stripped them of their banal and customary character. Henceforth these activities were described as if they had been invented for the first time, spontaneously, inspired by a passionate sorrow, which is unique among sorrows. Certainly the expression of sorrow by survivors is owing to a new intolerance of separation. But


people were troubled not only at the bedsides of the dying or by the memory of the deceased. The very idea of death moved them.

One of the La Ferronays' granddaughters, a "teenager" of the Romantic era, wrote thoughts of this sort: "Dying is a reward, since it is Heaven... The favorite idea of my entire life [as a child] is death, which has always made me smile.... Nothing has ever been able to make the word death lugubrious for me."

An engaged couple in this same family, not yet twenty, were walking in the marvelous gardens of the Villa Pamphili in Rome. "We talked," noted the boy in his secret diary, "for an hour on religion, immortality, and death, which would be sweet, we said, in these beautiful gardens." He added, "I will die young, I have always wanted to." He would be proven right. A few months after his marriage the plague of the century, tuberculosis, carried him off. His wife, a Protestant German, described his last breath: "His eyes, already staring, had turned toward me... and I, his wife, I felt what I would never have imagined, I felt that death was happiness." One hesitates to read aloud such a text in America today. How morbid the La Ferronnays family must seem!

(And yet, were things much different in the America of the 1830s? A contemporary of the little La

Ferronays girl, the fourteen year old Emmeline Grangerford whom Mark Twain described in Huckleberry Finn, also lived with the same obsession. She painted "mourning pictures," ladies weeping over tombs or reading a letter bearing the sad news. She also kept a secret diary, in which she copied down the deaths and fatal accidents about which she read in the Presbyterian Observer, and to this she added the poems which all these misfortunes inspired in her. She was inexhaustible: "She warned't particular; she could write about anything you choose to give her to write about just so it was sadful," observed Mark Twain, laughing behind his moustache.⁶

One is tempted to explain this overflowing of macabre affectivity by religion, the emotional religion of romantic Catholicism and of pietism, of Methodist Protestantism. Religion is certainly a factor, but the morbid fascination for death is a sublimation, a religious one it is true, of the erotic-macabre phantasms of the preceding period.

Thus, complaisance toward the idea of death is the first great change which years at the end of the eighteenth century and which has become one of the characteristics of Romanticism.

The second great change concerns the relationship between the dying person and his family.

Until the eighteenth century death was a concern for the person threatened by it, and for him alone. Thus it was up to each person to express his ideas, his feelings, his wishes. For that he had available a tool: his last will and testament, which was more than simply a legal document for the disposal of property. From the thirteenth to the eighteenth century the will was the means by which each person could express—often in a very personal manner—his deep thoughts; his religious faith; his attachment to his possessions, to the beings he loved, and to God; and the decisions he had made to assure the salvation of his soul and the repose of his body.

But the purpose of the pious clauses, which sometimes constituted the greatest part of the will, was to involve public officials, the executor, the financial directors of the church, (la fabrique), and the curate of the parish or the monks of the monastery, and to oblige them to carry out the wishes of the deceased.

Indeed, the will, in this form, evoked a distrust of or at least an indifference to the heirs, the close relatives, and the church. By an act deposited with the notary, most often signed by witnesses, the individual making the will imposed
his will upon those around him, which means that he was afraid of not otherwise being listened to or obeyed. It was to the same end that he had a stone or metal plaque placed in the church, bearing an excerpt from his will concerning the religious services and the legacy which endowed them. These permanent inscriptions on the walls and pillars of the church were a protection against being forgotten or neglected by both the parish and the family. They had more significance than the grave marker with its “Here lies . . . .”

But in the second half of the eighteenth century, a considerable change occurred in wills. We can assume that this change was common throughout all of the Christian West, both Protestant and Catholic. Theious clauses, the choice of a tomb, the funding of masses and religious services, and the giving of alms disappeared; the will was reduced to the document we find today, a legal act distributing fortunes. This is a very important event in the history of mentalities, and one to which a French historian, Michel Vovelle, has given the attention it merits.7

Thus the will was completely secularized in the eighteenth century. How can we explain this

until the first three decades of the twentieth century. Even more, as we have just said, romantic complaisance added emphasis to the words and gestures of the dying person. But the attitude of those present is the most changed. Though the dying person kept the leading role, the bystanders were no longer the passive, prayerful walk-ons of the past, and, at least from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century, they no longer expressed the great grief of the days of Charlemagne or King Arthur. Indeed, since approximately the twelfth century, the excessive mourning of the High Middle Ages had become ritualized. It only began after death had occurred and it was manifested in the garments and manners and had a specific duration, precisely fixed by custom.

Thus from the end of the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century mourning had a double purpose. On the one hand, it constrained the family of the deceased to demonstrate, at least for a certain period, a sorrow it did not always feel. A hurried remarriage might reduce mourning to a bare minimum, but its observance never completely eliminated. On the other hand, mourning served to protect the sincerely grieving survivor from the excesses of his grief. It imposéd upon him or her a certain type of social life—visits from relatives, neighbors, and friends—which was due him and in the course of which the sorrow might be dissipated without allowing its expression to exceed a level fixed by social conventions. Now, and this is a very important point, in the nineteenth century this level was no longer respected; mourning was unfurled with an uncanny degree of ostentation. It even claimed to have no obligations to social conventions and to be the most spontaneous and insurmountable expression of a very grave wound: people cried, fainted, languished, and fasted, as the companions of Roland or Launcelot had once done. It was a sort of return to the excessive and spontaneous demonstrations—or apparently spontaneous demonstrations—of the High Middle Ages, after seven centuries of sobriety. The nineteenth century is the era of mourning which the psychologist of today calls hysterical mourning. And it is true that at times they almost reached the point of madness, as in the story by Mark Twain, "The Californian's Tale," dated 1893, in which a man who after nineteen years had never accepted his wife's death celebrated the anniversary date of her death by awaiting her impossible return in the company of sympathetic friends who helped him maintain his illusion.

This exaggeration of mourning in the nineteenth century is indeed significant. It means that survivors accepted the death of another person with
WESTERN ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

greater difficult than in the past. Henceforth, and this is a very important change, the death which is feared is no longer so much the death of the self as the death of another, la mort de toi, thy death.

* * *

This feeling lies at the origin of the modern cult of tombs and cemeteries. It is a question of a phenomenon of a religious nature, unique to the contemporary era. Its importance might pass unnoticed by Americans of today, as by the inhabitants of industrial—and Protestant—northwestern Europe, because they would consider it foreign to their culture. An Englishman or an American would not fail to show his repugnance for the baroque excess of the funerary architecture in France or Italy. Yet the phenomenon, though less prevalent, does exist in their cultures. We shall return to this point because it is interesting to see what they have accepted or rejected in a religion of the dead which has been given free rein in Catholic, orthodox Europe.

First let us say that the nineteenth- and twentieth-century cult of tombs has nothing to do with the classical, pre-Christian cults of the dead, nor with an existence of these observances in folklore. Let us recall what we have already said about the Middle Ages, about the burial ad sanitos in churches or against the walls of churches. There was a great chasm between the attitudes of Antiquity concerning the dead and those of the Middle Ages. In the Middle Ages the dead were entrusted to or rather abandoned to the care of the Church, and the exact location of their place of burial was of little importance, most often being indicated neither by a monument nor even by a simple inscription. Certainly by the fourteenth century and especially since the seventeenth century, one can discern a more pronounced concern for marking the site of the tomb, a good indication of a new feeling which was increasingly being expressed, without being able to impose itself completely. The pious or melancholy visit to the tomb of a dear one was an unknown act.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, things changed, and I have been able to study this evolution in France.8 The accumulation of the dead within the churches or in the small churchyards suddenly became intolerable at least to the "enlightened" minds of the 1760s. What had been going on for almost a millennium without arousing any scruples became the object of vehement criti-

cism. An entire body of literature bears witness to this. On the one hand, public health was threatened by the pestilential emanations, the unhealthy odors rising from the common graves. On the other hand, the flooring of the churches and the ground of the cemeteries, which were saturated with cadavers, and the exhibition of bones in the charnel houses all constituted a permanent violation of the dignity of the dead. The Church was reproached for having done everything for the soul and nothing for the body, of taking money for masses and showing no concern for the tombs. The example of the Ancients, their piety toward the dead as shown by the remnants of their tombs as at Pompeii and by the eloquence of their funeral inscriptions, was called to mind. The dead should no longer poison the living, and the living should form a veritable lay cult to show their veneration of the dead. Their tombs therefore began to serve as a sign of their presence after death, a presence which did not necessarily derive from the concept of immortality central to religions of salvation such as Christianity, it derived instead from the survivors unwillingness to accept the departure of their loved ones. People clung on to the remains. They even went so far as to keep them visible in great bottles of alcohol, as in the case of Necker and his wife, the parents of Madame de Staël. Naturally such ob-

servances, though they were advocated by certain authors of plans for sepulchers, were not adopted in a general fashion. The common desire was either to keep the dead at home by burying them on the family property, or else to be able to visit them, if they were buried in a public cemetery. And in order to be able to visit them, the dead had to be "at home," which was not the case in the traditional funeral procedure, in which they were in the church. In the past one was buried before the image of the Virgin or in the chapel of the Holy Sacrament. Now people wanted to go to the very spot where the body had been placed, and they wanted this place to belong totally to the deceased and to his family. It was at this time that the burial concession became a certain form of property, protected from commerce, but assured in perpetuity. This was a very significant innovation. People went to visit the tomb of a dear one as one would go to a relative's home, or into one's own home, full of memories. Memory conferred upon the dead a sort of immortality which was initially foreign to Christianity. From the end of the eighteenth century and even at the height of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in anticlerical and agnostic France, unbelievers would be the most assiduous visitors to the tombs of their relatives. The visit to the cemetery in France and Italy became, and still is, the great continuing religious act. Those who no longer go to church still go to the cemetery, where they have become accustomed to place flowers on the tombs. They meditate there, that is to say they evoke the dead person and cultivate his memory.

Thus it is a private cult, but also from its very origins, a public one. The cult of memory immediately spread from the individual to society as a result of one and the same wave of sensibility. The eighteenth-century authors of cemetery plans wanted cemeteries to serve both as parks organized for family visits and as museums for illustrious persons, like St. Paul's Cathedral in London. There the tombs of heroes and great men would be venerated by the State. This was a different conception from that of the dynastic chapels or crypts such as Saint-Denis, Westminster, the Escorial, or the Capuchins of Vienna.

A new concept of society was born at the end of the eighteenth century; it developed during the nineteenth century and found its expression in Auguste Comte's positivism, an intellectualized form of nationalism. It was thought, and even felt,
that society is composed of both the dead and the living. The city of the dead is the obverse of the society of the living, or rather than the obverse, it is its image, its intemporal image. For the dead have gone through the moment of change, and their monuments are the visible sign of the permanence of their city.

Thus the cemetery once again gained a place in the city—a place both physical and moral—which it had lost in the early Middle Ages, but which it had occupied throughout Antiquity. What would we know about ancient civilization without the objects, the inscriptions, and the iconography found by archeologists while excavating tombs? Our tombs are empty, but much can be learned from our cemeteries, the size of which speaks eloquently about our mentality. Indeed, the piety and the new respect shown for tombs resulted in an extension of the surface area of cemeteries, because it had become intolerable and forbidden to pile up corpses as in the charnel houses of the Middle Ages. Thus the last reserved for the dead became increasingly intrusive, which soon aroused concern among the authorities. But public opinion resisted attempts to end the propagation of cemeteries.

During Napoleon III’s reign, the administration wanted to deconsecrate the Parisian cemeteries, which had in the early nineteenth century been planned outside the city but which had been enveloped by urban expansion. They could evoke a precedent for this: at the end of Louis XVI’s reign the old Cemetery of the Innocents, which had been in use for more than five centuries, had been razed, plowed, dug up, and built over, to the great indifference of the population. But in the second half of the nineteenth century the mentality had changed. Public opinion rose against the government’s sacrilegious projects, a unanimous public opinion in which the Catholics, united with their positivist enemies. Henceforth the cemetery appeared a necessity of the city. Today the cult of the dead is one of the forms or expressions of patriotism. Thus in France the anniversary of the victorious conclusion of World War I is considered the feast-day of dead soldiers. It is celebrated at the Monument to the Dead, to be found in every French village, no matter how small. Without a monument to the dead the victory could not be celebrated. In the new cities created by recent industrial development, the absence of a monument to the dead thus created a quandry. The problem was solved by virtually annexing the monument of a nearby, deserted little village.¹⁰ For this monu-

---

¹⁰ This is what occurred at Lacq, near Pau, where the exploiting of natural gas resulted in the creation of a new industrial city.
ment is indeed a tomb, an empty one of course, but it perpetuates memory, a *monumentum*.

* * *

We now reach a point in this long evolution at which we should pause and introduce a new factor. We have followed variations in time, a long but still changing time. We have scarcely, except for a few details, considered variations in locations. We might say that the phenomena which we are studying here were approximately the same through all of Western civilization. But, in the course of the nineteenth century this similarity in mentalities changed and important differences appeared. We see North America, England, and a part of northwestern Europe break away from France, Germany, and Italy. What does this differentiation involve, and what is its meaning?

In the nineteenth century and until World War I (a great revolution in mores) the difference was scarcely apparent either in the protocol of funerals or in mourning customs. But this difference can be observed in cemeteries and in the art on tombstones. Our English friends do not fail to point out to us continental how extravagantly baroque our cemeteries are—take the Campo Santo of Genoa or the old (nineteenth-century) cemeteries of our major French cities with their tombs surmounted by statues writhing, embracing one another, and lamenting. There is no doubt that at that time a great transformation occurred.

At the end of the eighteenth century, cemeteries were similar throughout the Western world; in England, North America, and parts of northwestern Europe the same model persists today. The English cemetery of today closely resembles what the French cemetery had been until the end of the eighteenth century, when burial in churches and even within the city limits was forbidden. We find it intact in America, for example in Alexandria, Virginia: a bit of countryside and nature, a pretty English garden in a setting of grass, moss, and trees, sometimes but not necessarily still adjacent to the church.

The tombs of this period were a combination of the two elements which until then had generally been used separately: the horizontal flat tombstone, and the “Here-lies” type of stone establishing a bequest, a stone which was vertical because it was to be affixed to a wall. In France, in the few late-eighteenth-century cemeteries that are still extant, the two elements are juxtaposed. In colonial America the vertical element was generally the only one kept. A stone stele was erected at the head of the grave, which was itself merely covered
WESTERN ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

with grass, while the foot was occasionally indicated by a small marker. In both cases the inscription was placed on the vertical headstone. The inscription, both biographic and elegiac, was the only luxury of these sepulchers, which made a show of simplicity. This simplicity was only disregarded in cases of famous persons whose destiny had provided an example for the national necropolis, or dramatic or extraordinary deaths. This cemetery was the end product of a search for simplicity which can be followed in its different forms throughout all of Western civilization, in the second half of the eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century, even in papal Rome, where baroque customs persist.

This simplicity did not imply a disloyalty to the loved one; to the contrary. It fitted in very well with the melancholy of the romantic cult of the dead. This cult found its first poet in England: Thomas Gray, author of "Elegy in a Country Churchyard." The Elegy! It was translated into French, one particular version being by André Chénier, and it served as a model for others.

It is in America, in Washington D.C., even more than in the Panthéon of Paris, that we find the first major manifestations of the funeral cult of the hero. In a city filled with commemorative monuments, such as those to Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln—which are "tombs" without sepulchers—a twentieth-century European encounters an even stranger phenomenon: Arlington Cemetery. Here, despite its public and national character, the garden of the Lee-Custis House has preserved its appearance of a private estate.

Although astonishing to a European of today, the civic and funerary landscape at Arlington and along the Mall sprang from the same sentiment that caused a multiplicity of monuments to the war dead in the France of the 1920s, monuments which are doubtlessly today quite incomprehensible to the descendents of those who created Arlington and the center of Washington.

Thus, regardless of religious differences, simplicity and the romantic hero cults formed the common denominator throughout Western civilization in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. And it is here that we find the point of departure. The United States and northwestern Europe were to remain more or less faithful to this old model, while continental Europe strayed away and constructed for its dead monuments which became increasingly complicated and figurative.

A careful study of an American custom would perhaps help us find an explanation for this:

THY DEATH
“mourning pictures.” These lithographs or embroidered panels, now found in museums, were intended to decorate the home. They played the role of the tomb, of the memorial, a sort of portable tomb adapted to American mobility—if this mobility is not at that time an anachronistic myth. Likewise, in the museum of York, England, we find Victorian funeral announcements which are reproductions of neo-gothic funeral chapels, those very chapels which served as models for the French tomb builders of the same period. It is as if the English and the Americans of the day were committing to paper or silk—ephemeral substances—what the continental Europeans were portraying on tombstones.

One is obviously tempted to attribute this difference to the contrast between Protestantism and Catholicism. This explanation appears suspect to the historian, at least at first glance. Indeed, the separation of the churches by the Council of Trent occurred much earlier than this divorce in funeral attitudes. Throughout the seventeenth century people were buried in exactly the same fashion (with variations in the liturgy, of course) in Pepys’ England, in the Holland of those genre painters who specialized in church interiors, and in French and Italian churches. The mental attitudes were the same.

Yet there appears to be some truth in the religious explanation when we realize that during the nineteenth century Catholicism developed sentimental, emotional means of expression which it had avoided in the eighteenth century. After the great baroque rhetoric: a sort of romantic neobaroquism. That type of Catholicism, especially in France, became a quite different thing from that of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Nevertheless, we must not forget what we were saying a short time ago: that the exalted and emotive nature of the cult of the dead did not have a Christian origin. It had a positivist origin, and the Catholics rallied to it and assimilated it so perfectly that they thought it indigenous to their religion.

Should we not instead implicate the nature of the socio-economic revolution of the nineteenth century? More than religion, the rate of industrialization and urbanization intervened. Neo-baroque funeral attitudes developed in cultures in which, even in towns and large cities, economic growth was less rapid and rural influences persisted. I have put the question before you. I think it should be an interesting one for the historians of American mentalities.

In any case, a fault line became evident, and the crack would widen toward the middle of the twentieth century. The great twentieth-century re-
fusal to accept death is incomprehensible if we do not take this fault line into account, for this refusal was born and developed on only one side of that frontier.